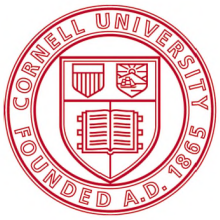


Document Title: Literary Detection
Author: Stephanie Gehring

Course: English 147.04
Course Title: the Mystery in the Story
Year: Spring 2007

Literary Detection: Assignment Sequence from "The Mystery in the Story," Engl. 147.04

In my First-Year Writing Seminar, I decided to focus primarily on the construction of lucid, interesting arguments. Since the course is in the English department and the arguments in the course are based on literature, students needed first to learn how to read a text closely and make accurate observations about it. I had four goals for my students:

1. I wanted them to become comfortable and proficient as readers, to know by the end of the course that they have the skills to consider any piece of writing and, if they take time, to make some sort of useful (and hopefully interesting) sense of it.
2. I wanted them to be able to construct clear paragraphs, from the sentence level on up, and to be comfortable in the format of the college-level literary analysis essay.
3. I wanted them to know how to process secondary sources and to properly cite and integrate primary and secondary sources in a way that firstly gives credit for ideas to the authors of those ideas, and secondly flows smoothly and productively into the essay's argument.
4. I wanted students to integrate the first three skills and develop the ability to take a mystery story or novel, consider it closely, if applicable take into account secondary sources as jumping-off points, construct a central claim that produces argumentative tension by being complex and not self-evident, and to support and develop that claim throughout the essay using direct textual evidence.

In both my classes so far there have been students who did not reach the level of argument or lucidity in writing for which I had hoped. Then there have been a few students who came in able to do almost exactly what I was asking from day one. Mostly, however, there have been students who came in with strong skills in some areas and weak ones in others, who have made good progress toward strong literary analysis by the end of the course.

The variation in skill level in various areas is challenging; however, I've found that the variation can be a huge help when it comes to peer reviews, because there are few students who are good at everything. (Most students, to my surprise, were relatively proficient at integrating quotations; I was able to work individually with those who weren't and spent little class time on this skill.) The student who produces lovely polished writing that doesn't say much can be of great use to the student who has a strong argument that's disappearing in awkward language and mechanical error, and vice versa. In both my classes so far, peer reviews have turned out to be hugely helpful to students (again to my surprise: I found them boring and unproductive when I was a student). I adapted an evaluation sheet with questions from Stuart Davis, and as I looked over the comments students gave each other, I was impressed and delighted; many essays were also significantly marked up with marginalia, and students took time and care filling out each other's reviews. After the first two essays, I asked students to fill out brief evaluations of peer reviews in order to decide whether to continue them for the rest of the semester, and so far have gotten unanimous enthusiasm.

The six essays in this course build from two initial essays that are not full literary analysis essays, to two literary analyses with directive prompts, to a revision and expansion, several brief response papers, and finally to a seven-page literary analysis for which students are strongly encouraged to develop their own argument (without a directive prompt), possibly from one of several response papers.

I began the semester with a short essay assignment, assigned the first day and due the second, in which students were able to explore and begin to develop their concepts of mystery stories as a genre. I posted two strong examples of this essay on Blackboard, and we reviewed them in class, which gave me

the opportunity to assess students' ability to comment on writing, and gave them the opportunity to see what kind of writing I am looking for.

Next we read several mystery stories and essays about mystery stories, and discussed these intensively in class (I've included the discussion questions I used). Because students often struggle with separating summary from analysis, the second essay consisted of two straight summaries, one of Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and one of an excerpt from Tzvetan Todorov's introductory chapter to *The Typology of Detective Fiction*. There were strict word limits on these summaries in order to force students to condense and to become aware that summary is always a matter of choosing. We reviewed one example of each kind of summary in class, and discussed the differences between plot summary and the summary of a critical essay. I pointed out that in later essays, the central arguments needed to intricately shape the summary included in essays: beyond providing minimal background to ground the reader, summary should only appear when it is specifically and directly relevant to the central argument. The summary assignment has worked well. It gives students the opportunity to focus on clear writing without all the pressure of developing an argument at the same time, and gives them the opportunity to succeed – all my students so far have been capable, with guidance, of excellent summaries, provided they take the time. Further, the ability to summarize concisely is essential throughout the remainder of the course.

For the third and fourth essays, students chose from a wide variety of prompts, including several creative options. One particularly successful option has been the "Revisionist Analysis," which is based on a sample revisionist essay by "Vivian Darkbloom" (someone writing under a pseudonym) that takes apart Doyle's "The Speckled Band." The tone of this essay is irreverent, and the structure of its argument is different from the traditional literary paper in that it builds evidence gradually and states its real claim at the end. Students loved this option, and I think it helped them break out of the five-paragraph essay. We discussed five-paragraph essays in class, which helped me see what they had been taught in high school, and helped them realize that they need no longer stick rigidly to that format. Both the third and fourth essays went through one cycle of draft and peer review. We did several in-class assignments in preparation for these essays which were designed to help students on a variety of levels, whether in their observational skills as readers, in their ability to formulate an argument into a clear thesis statement, or in their ability to organize a paragraph so that the sentences follow logically and interestingly from one another.

For the fifth essay, students chose either to revise and expand essay 3 or 4, or to write a first version of the sixth essay, which was the culminating piece of writing for the semester. At seven pages, it was the longest literary analysis paper, using at least one secondary source and, if possible, developing an original argument not based on a directive prompt (though I did provide many starting points). The response papers assigned between essays 5 and 6 were intended to serve as beginning points for ideas for the final essay. Also to be handed in with this essay was a 1-2 page letter to me, describing their progress and learning as writers over the course of the semester, and giving any suggestions for changes in future classes. These letters seem to have helped students as much as they helped me: they have taken great care, have analyzed their own progress thoughtfully, and have given me useful and insightful suggestions for future incarnations of this course.

One more essential component of this sequence of assignments is conferencing. I require two conferences with each student per semester: The first conference is before the first literary analysis paper: I've seen two pieces of their writing, so I have some sense of their strengths and weaknesses, and they bring an outline of their essay and tell me what they're going to write about, so that I can give them guidance before the ideas have set completely. The second is before their last paper, again with a

preliminary version in hand. The conferences improve the quality of essays dramatically, and many of my students came in for several optional conferences over the course of the semester.

List of Assignments, Activities and Relevant Readings (bold items attached):

Essay 1: Mystery Text A
In-Class Peer Review

Activities and Reading:
Discussion Questions, Poe
Discussion Questions, Todorov and Van Dine
Essay 2: Boil it Down (Summary)
In-Class Peer review

Activities and Readings:
"What an A Essay Does" handout (given out with other guidelines on grading and assignments)
Hacker, read sections on Punctuation & Clarity, discuss in class
Williams, from *Ten Lessons in Clarity & Grace*, Ch. 4 on Characters (active and passive)
Close Reading handout
Conferences (with draft of Essay 3)
Hacker, read section on Grammar, discuss briefly in class
Essay 3: First literary analysis paper
Peer Review on draft, focus on argument

Activities and Readings:
Thesis Statements
Paragraph Exercise
Optional Conferences
Essay 4: Second literary analysis paper
Peer Review on draft

Activities and Readings:
Optional Conferences
Essay 5: Revision of either 3 or 4, or first version of Essay 6

Activities and Readings:
In-class close review of sample essays from last semester; focus on introductions and on paragraph transitions
Williams on Cohesion and Coherence
Individual thesis workshops for students who volunteer
Conferences
Response Papers 1-4
Essay 6: Longest literary analysis paper, with letter reflecting on writing progress
Peer Review on draft, using previous peer review forms and/or extensive marginal notes

[Note: printing is front and back, and where possible, short handouts have been placed two on a page]

Essay 1: Mystery Text A
due Thursday, Jan. 25

Attached are all but the final pages of a classic mystery story, "Mystery Text A." Read them carefully, and then write a 2-page essay **proposing and defending a solution** to the mystery. At our next meeting you'll get the remainder ("Mystery Text A, part 2), and we can try to figure out why you and the author came up with the solutions you and he found.

In your essay, consider **more than one solution** to this case, showing why the one you prefer is likely to be the right one or is better than others. That may well involve showing why other choices are wrong, or do not fit in a detective story.

Part of your reasoning will be based on the facts as presented, but part will depend on your sense of the **genre**, of the way it guides your expectations and the possibilities it allows and precludes for character and action. (A geopolitical thriller, but not a mystery novel, can end with thermonuclear disaster. A Harlequin romance is never invaded by space aliens. The hero of a Western never encounters talking, rational horses. A Sherlock Holmes story never ends with the discovery that—lo!—it was all a dream.) What are the "rules" of mystery stories, and why? In your essay, use your defense of a solution to articulate your sense of those rules and the reasons behind them.

Key Questions for Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"
due in class Tuesday, Jan. 30th

1. *Analysis in Theory and Practice*
Mark at least one passage where Poe's narrator or detective talks *about* analysis, and one where Dupin *applies* analysis. How does the applied analysis compare to the theoretical analysis?

2. *The Nature of the Narrator*
What is Poe's narrator like? What function does he serve in the story?

3. *"Murders:" The Story that Defined a Genre?*
In the introduction his book *The Perfect Murder*, David Lehman writes:
"Critics who may disagree on everything else concur in regarding Poe as the most significant figure in the detective story's history and development—though only a handful of Poe's stories can be called, in his words, 'tales of ratiocination.'" From "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" alone one might deduce virtually all the primary rules of the genre and many of its secondary rituals."

As you read, think about the rules we made Tuesday, and the rules you defined for yourself in Essay 1. How does this story relate to those rules? If it is a story that helped define the mystery genre, does it need to keep the rules? When you think about your current understanding of what a mystery story is and compare it to "Murders," at what points do you see "Murders" as a potential prototype for the whole genre? In other words, what is specifically mystery-story-like about it? (Side note: What, in your opinion, would a story need to do in order to be considered the first detective mystery ever?)

Discussion Questions, Todorov and Van Dine
due in class Thursday, Feb. 1st

There are many interesting points in the readings for Thursday; the below are just questions to get you started. Do not be limited by the questions; feel free to bring up other points that interest you as well.

1. What is the difference between subject and fable, and why does Todorov think they are so important?

2. If you had to choose just three, which of Van Dine's rules do you think are most essential, and why? Be prepared to argue your choices in class on Thursday.

3. One of the essential elements in a good essay is a strong argument, a statement which you as the writer are proposing and with which an intelligent person could disagree – if it's self-evident, why write the essay at all? Both Van Dine and Todorov make strong statements. Choose one to disagree with, and be prepared to argue your case in class.

Essay 2: Boil it Down

due Friday, Feb. 2 at 12:00 in Dropbox AND Tuesday, Feb. 6 in hard copy.

Part 1: Write a concise summary of Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Begin by writing a summary that includes whatever comes to you. The result is likely to be too long. Now go back and reconsider. Think carefully about the story's plot; which actions are significant enough to be included in a one-paragraph summary? Pare down the summary sharply; **use no more than 400 words**. Poe's story includes a great deal of information beyond pure plot. You should make sure to give an accurate general sense of the plot; you should also make choices and give some rendering of Poe's non-plot digressions. What is important about them? Make choices that give your summary a sense of unity and not fragmentation. It's hard; choosing what to leave out is as important as choosing what to put in.

Part 2: Summarize Todorov's essay in no more than 400 words. Begin by summarizing each paragraph in one sentence. Then go through and look at the flow of ideas. Can any of your summary sentences be condensed and combined? Summary is an act of selection. You will not be able to fully render each point Todorov makes. I am asking you primarily to make choices, and to arrive at a summary that gives a sense of the flow of the essay's argument as you understood it, which means choosing what points you think are most important to his argument.

A few mechanics:

- Clearly identify the author and title in the first sentence: *Chesterton opens his 'The Man in the Passage' with a description of two men who recognize each other's silhouettes.*
- Reproduce all action in the present tense, unless it precedes the story's present: *When Sherlock Holmes travels to the Musgrave estate, he finds the elm tree described in the ritual has been cut down.*
- Do not quote from the work; use your own words (and sentences) only. Do not include commentary, but do write in your own voice, and make your prose vivid: Vary your sentence length and type, choose your words carefully, and pay attention to the rhythm of your sentences. As you work, occasionally read your summary aloud to yourself. Make sure it doesn't sound like it could put a person to sleep; just because you're summarizing does not mean your writing should be boring.
- Include a Works Cited page for the two sources you're using ("Murders in the Rue Morgue" and Todorov's essay). Refer to your handbook (Hacker) if you are unsure about how to do this.
- Refer to the Essay Format handout to make sure you have your essay in proper format before turning it in to the Dropbox and, the following Tuesday, in class.

More details about what an "A" essay does:

This list can serve as a "checklist" of sorts. An excellent paper does the following:

1) Makes me forget that I have to grade it as a teacher; it invites reading

2) Starts with a vital opening

3) Progresses through to a main body with substance

4) Concludes in a convincing manner that makes sense with the rest of the paper

5) Demonstrates a definite awareness of an audience and what they need in order to follow the argument

6) Engages with a question at issue in the sense that opposing views are fairly represented and receive some response

7) Supports each key assertion (opinion, claim, etc.) with appropriate evidence or reasoning

8) Avoids obvious logical fallacies or contradictions

9) Documents sources appropriately

10) Strikes a workable balance between the writer's voice and those of the sources

11) Seamlessly integrates quotes into statements

12) Employs sources which are themselves appropriate to the context of the argument

13) Argues a clear thesis and develops that thesis throughout the essay

14) Makes smooth transitions between topics

15) Offers both general abstractions and concrete details

16) Embraces a tone which suits the subject and the audience

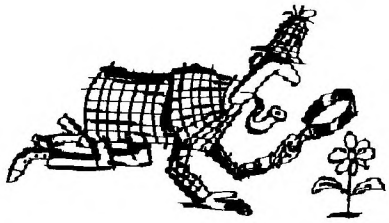
17) Uses a style which is effective -- and avoids awkward phrases

18) Avoids clichés in favor of fresh diction

19) Attends to necessary, if dull matters: the pages are numbered, the formal criteria for the course have been followed, there are no spelling errors, etc...

[adapted from guidelines by Fritz Umbach]

Close Reading (or: Literary Clue-Gathering)



To find interesting ideas about stories that lead to interesting arguments, a person must read the stories carefully, paying close attention to their details and how the writer combines those details. "Close reading" is the term used in literary studies to describe the process of attention that leads to worthwhile questions, discussions and arguments.

"Close reading" means somewhat different things in different contexts, but is usually understood as "an exploration of how a literary work produces meaning." When you read something closely, you use Sherlock Holmes' magnifying glass and Father Brown's intuition. Close reading is both a *process*—of analyzing and interpreting a piece of writing—and a *product*—an argument based on this process. This method of reading is "close" in that it is attentive to minute details within a text (a poem, novel, short story, etc.)—details that may be very precise but that can nonetheless help to elucidate the larger issues at play within a piece of writing. Ultimately, close reading steps back, telescopes out, and tries to place the details in reference to the larger whole. The final result is a well-considered piece of writing that arranges details from the text so as to support an argument.

"Close reading" a text usually involves three main steps:

1: What do I notice?

Observation. What patterns or details do you observe in the language of the text? (These details may well be completely obvious once pointed out, but that's fine.) What kinds of images or symbols are used? How does the plot develop, if there is a plot? What words or phrases are repeated throughout the text? What is the overall tone of the language? What is the feeling evoked by the language?

2: How do I interpret what I notice? What inferences can be drawn from my observations?

Interpretation/Inferences. Once you have identified details in a particular text you'll want to consider questions such as "how" they function and "why" they are there.

Why is a particular phrase used over and over? Why is a particular effect created at a particular moment? How do the details, images, or symbols relate to the bigger picture of the text? Do plot and language reinforce one another, or is there a disjuncture between what the text says and how it says it?

3: What is my argument? What does all of this add up to?

Once you have a series of *observations* and *interpretations*, step back and think about what seems most important or interesting among the connections you have drawn, and the ideas that you have developed from the text. Produce a coherent argument based on your *observations* and *interpretations*. This will form the basis of your argument, and you will already have observations and interpretations with which to support that argument in a precise, concise, well-crafted essay.

[Adapted from "What is Close Reading?" by Kerry Walk]

Essay 3

1 page due at conference, week of Tue., Feb. 12
Full draft due Fri. Feb. 16 in Dropbox and Tue. Feb. 20 in class, *three* hard copies

Note: Unless otherwise noted, all options should add up to 3 pages (about 1000 words).

Option 1

Write a 3-page revisionist analysis, in Vivian Darkbloom's style, of either "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter," "The Man in the Passage," the "The Musgrave Ritual," or, if you want, any other story in the course materials. "Revisionist" is not the same as "deconstructionist": your criticism of details that don't add up must lead to a proposed alternate reality (e.g., Darkbloom posits Holmes actually meant to elope with Helen Stoner). Try to achieve Darkbloom's tone of intelligent, academic fun, and to preserve the structure of her argument: point out discrepancies first (sticking to the ones that support the alternate reality you will propose) and lead gradually into your "revision" of the story, which may be preposterous but must be supported by your interpretation of the story's details. To your conference on Monday, bring a compressed one-page outline of the alternate story you propose and the textual evidence (passages and details) you will use to support it.

Option 2

Write a two-page scene (about 660 words, though you may go longer if necessary) using characters from one of the stories we've read but depicting an occurrence or dialogue not present in the story. Write a 1-page analysis of your scene discussing ways in which it adds to or changes the mystery in the story you've chosen. In your analysis, make sure to discuss the scene you wrote in the context of the mystery genre (does your scene stay within that genre? Discuss ways in which it does or doesn't.) A few pointers for this option:

i. If you choose a murder scene, your scene *must* include a significant element not present in the original story; you can't just write the scene of the murder as the detective deduced that it happened. (You need not choose a murder scene; any scene will do, though there must be some sort of interest-creating conflict.)
ii. Use a first-person narrator.
iii. Write your scene in the style of the writer whose story you are starting from; use similar tone and vocabulary (for example, if you use "The Murders…" use Poe's language, including words like "recherché" and "outré"). However, if you choose a narrator other than the one used in the story, feel free to adjust the storytelling voice to what you feel fits your narrator.
iv. If you like, to get in the mood and to tie your scene into the story, you may either begin or end your story with a few lines or sentences from the original story you're using.
v. The story option is not an easy out, or an automatic good grade – your story must be interesting and your analysis thought-provoking.

To your conference, bring at least one page of your scene and some coherent thoughts for the analysis portion of your paper.

Option 3
Compare the murderer in one of Doyle's or Chesterton's stories ("The Speckled Band," "The Musgrave Ritual," "The Man in the Mirror") to Poe's orangutan. How do (or don't) Doyle and Chesterton modify Poe's original premise in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," that murderers are essentially orangutans, or "apes dressed in velvet"?[1] (Is this an accurate description of Poe's premise? What are the implications of this premise?) To your conference, bring a compressed one-page outline of your argument and the textual evidence (passages and details) you will use to support it.

Option 4
In his essay "The Guilty Vicarage," W. H. Auden gives the following definitions of what he sees as three distinct story genres (careful; he may not be using terms the same way Todorov does):

> "The interest in the thriller is the ethical and eristic conflict between good and evil, between Us and Them. The interest in the study of a murderer is the observation, by the innocent many, of the sufferings of the guilty one. The interest in the detective story is the dialectic of innocence and guilt."
>
> W. H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," in *The Dyer's Hand* (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 147.*

Make an analysis of one of the stories we've read so far, using Auden's definitions. In your argument, explore ways in which the definitions hold for your story (i.e., the story falls under Auden's definition of "detective story") or don't hold for your story (i.e., the story contains significant elements from Auden's definitions of the other two genres). Your argument need not fall completely on one side or the other (complete agreement or complete disagreement), but your position with respect to Auden should be clear to your reader. Include Auden's words in your essay so your reader can refer to them. To your conference on Monday, bring a compressed one-page outline of your argument and the textual evidence (passages and details) you will use to support it.

Option 5
In his *The Perfect Murder*, David Lehman makes the following comment:

> "What we see in the mirror—an ape with a shaving brush—may well terrify us but shouldn't take us by surprise. After all, we've read enough murder mysteries to know that the deed was probably done by the least likely suspect, and what phrase could better describe any of us? … [T]he murderer as the reader? Never—which is to say, on some implicit, metaphorical level, always. … Readers of detective novels participate in perfect murders—perfect because they offer us a vicarious and therefore socially acceptable form of releasing our homicidal instincts, and they allow us to do it again and again and again, letting us off the hook each time, without ever having to face the consequences. 'Books talk among themselves,' writes Umberto Eco, 'and any true detection should prove that we are the guilty party.'"
>
> David Lehman, *The Perfect Murder* (New York: Macmillian, 1989), p. 2*
> Quote within quote: Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p. 81*

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[1] This phrase is from the following passage in Lehman: "Man, evolved from the apes, is no more than a toilet-trained ape or, as a character puts it in Eric Ambler's *Journey Into Fear* (1960) 'an ape in velvet.'" (David Lehman, *The Perfect Murder* (New York: Macmillian, 1989), p. 16)

Choose one of the stories we've read so far and consider its treatment of guilt and innocence. Develop an argument that uses the above paragraph as a jumping-off point (If you like, you may refer also to the Auden quote from option 4, but you need not use both quotes, or even all of Lehman's). Then write an essay applying that claim to the story you chose. Make an argument about ways that the story either supports or does not support Lehman's claim.

Important: Your argument must do more than say, either "Here's why Lehman is wrong," or "Here's why Lehman is right." It must **apply Lehman's reasoning and your own reasoning to this story specifically**, using concrete evidence from the text to arrive at an argument that sheds new light on Lehman's claim(s). As a way of focusing your thoughts, you may want to summarize Lehman's claim, or the part of his claim that interests you, in one sentence. This will help clarify where you're beginning and help you move out from there. To your conference on Monday, bring a compressed one-page outline of your argument and the textual evidence (passages and details) you will use to support it.

Other Guidelines:

- Somewhere near the beginning of your essays (for option 2, at the beginning of the analytical portion), **state the name and author of the story or stories you are discussing, as well as the questions or topic you'll be addressing and the position you'll take**. However, you do not need a full, formal introduction. Likewise, give your reader some sense of **closure** at the end of the essay, but you need not have a full conclusion.
- The assignment for this paper is to write literary analysis (this is modified somewhat for the revisionist analysis and the story/scene, of course). Literary analysis requires **textual evidence**, by which I mean direct and sustained focus on the language, imagery and narrative of one particular story. Do not write, for example, a comparison of mysteries and thrillers in general. You probably won't have space, either, to write about more than one story with the depth I'm requesting for this paper.
- As part of textual evidence, you will need to include **direct quotes** (as well as paraphrase, concise summary, details, etc.) from the story or stories you are analyzing. These should be appropriately integrated and cited; see the *Style Manual*. You are welcome also to include quotes or ideas from Darkbloom, Todorov, or other sources; if you do, make sure to integrate, attribute and cite their ideas appropriately (MLA; see Hacker).
- You will need, at some points in your essays, to include a certain amount of summary. Make sure, however, that your essay is **at least eighty percent argument**, and whenever possible, integrate summary into your argument (give details as supporting evidence) rather than including it in large chunks.
- If you quote or paraphrase directly from stories or critical essays, make sure that each paragraph you write contains **over fifty percent your words**.
- Include a **Works Cited** for all sources used, including the story or stories. Make sure to format correctly; mistakes this time around will lower your grade. Your Works Cited does not need to be on a separate page.
- Refer to the **Essay Format Sheet** for proper manuscript formatting; I will expect all essays to comply.

The Sherlockian

an interdisciplinary journal of mystery story studies

You have been asked to read and report on an article that *The Sherlockian* is considering for publication in its January 2007 issue. The article is in the draft stage, and publication is dependent on the success of revisions. At this stage, structural comments are essential. Please read the article and complete the questions below. Be as specific as you can in suggesting desirable changes, and make sure to point out the strengths as well as the weaknesses you see in the piece. Please spend 20-30 minutes on your reading and comments, and make notes on the article itself as needed. Focus on the overall claim and organization of the essay, but feel free to point out grammar and punctuation as well.

Author's name:
Title of article:
Reader's name:

Organization and Main Points

1. Please summarize, in two or three sentences, what *the introduction* sets up as the central purpose for the article.

2. In one sentence each, summarize the article's *body paragraphs*.

3. Evaluate paragraphs. First, are they clearly focused on one idea, or do they jump around? Second, do they develop their central ideas so that the argument moves forward in each paragraph?

4. In one or two sentences, summarize what the conclusion does to wrap up or expand the writer's controlling purpose.

Further Development of Central Claim

5. Where in this article do you have the greatest sense of productive tension, a sense of wanting to know what comes next and feeling engaged with the writing? What is the most interesting claim this article makes? This claim may be in the conclusion. Is there a statement that ought to be brought from a body or concluding paragraph to function as the article's central claim, which would be stated in the introduction and would cause a restructuring of the whole piece?

6. Where do you feel confused, or uncertain of the writer's direction, or in need of more information and understanding?

7. Does the author cite enough detail from the text he or she writes about to enable a reader — even one who had not read that text — to understand what is being said? Where should s/he cite more from the text or go into greater detail about the text?

8. Present one objection that might be made to the argument of the author's article. Go into detail, if necessary, in developing that objection.

9. Make any additional comments that you think will help the author in revising this article.

[adapted from handout by Stuart Davis]

Evaluation of Peer Reviews
due in hard copy and Dropbox, Fri., Feb. 23

In about 200 words, please answer the following questions:

1. Were the small-group peer reviews on your Essay 3 draft helpful to you in revising your paper?

2. Did you feel you were able to sort out the suggestions you should take from the ones that were off-base?

3. What was the most helpful comment you received? (Feel free to give the name of the reviewer if you remember.)

4. What was frustrating about the peer review process? How could it be improved?

5. Did you feel you learned and benefited more from in-class peer review of selected essays (as on Essay 1 and Essay 2) or from small-group peer review? Why?

Developing a Thesis Statement "with Teeth in it"

Your thesis is your main argument, stated in one or two sentences, usually at the bottom of the first paragraph. As an **argument,** it should be **a statement that a reasonable person who has read the text could disagree with.** This does not mean that the more far-fetched the thesis is, the better it will be. In addition to being interesting, your thesis needs to be convincing and well-supported with evidence from the text. The best thesis statements engage with a tension in a text or texts. Just as narratives grow out of tensions that cause something to happen, a good essay revolves around a tension or tensions so that "something happens" in the course of the essay.

1. Making a dull thesis interesting:

Dull thesis: "Sherlock Holmes is a good detective because he keeps an open mind when considering the evidence, uses his intuition, and pays attention to details."

This thesis is acceptable, but it sounds like the author just had to come up with three arguments for three main body paragraphs. What can we do to give it some teeth?

a) Ask yourself, what is the most interesting or controversial point in this thesis?

-For example, most people would agree that Sherlock Holmes keeps an open mind and pays attention to details, but not everyone thinks he uses his intuition. This tension can be used to reformulate the thesis.

b) Rephrase the thesis to make the interesting point the main point.

Interesting thesis: "Sherlock Holmes often uses intuition to solve his cases."

OR, better yet,

"While it appears that Sherlock Holmes relies on the scientific methods of logic and deduction, it is actually often his intuition that solves the case."

This last example is particularly interesting because it immediately acknowledges a tension: What initially appears to be is not necessarily so.

2. Creating an interesting thesis from a seemingly "dull" topic:

Topic: In his essay on the typology of detective fiction, Todorov argues that "it is no accident that it [the mystery story] is often told by a friend of the detective, who explicitly acknowledges that he is writing a book" (45). Discuss the significance of the relationship between Holmes and Watson in "The Musgrave Ritual."

a) This topic provides a broad area of inquiry. What are all the different ways that you could take up this topic while still answering the question?
b) Which of these possibilities interests you most? Narrow the topic down to one angle.
c) What is one tentative argument that you could make using your angle?
d) Keep in mind that as you gather evidence to support your thesis, you may have to change your thesis to accommodate this evidence. You should always reread the first draft of your essay asking yourself what you have actually done in the course of the essay. You may need to revise your thesis so that it reflects what you actually end up arguing. Essays often take new directions as you actually compose them, but the final product still needs to be concise, clear, and coherent.

[adapted from Melissa Gniadek]

Paragraph Exercise
due in class, hard copy only, Tue. Mar. 13

Below are two paragraphs with their sentences disordered. **Your job is to reconstruct their order by discovering the language clues the writer used to organize his paragraphs.** Do not spend more than half an hour on the exercise unless you want to. As you put the sentences in order, consider what you know about the elements of paragraph structure; some of these elements are listed below. As you work, please add at least one point to the list that you feel is essential to determining a paragraph's order and making the writing feel fluid and clear.

- Comprehensibility: The first sentence must start with terms that are relatively self-explanatory, or it must explain those terms.
- Repeated terms: sentences may move forward by repeating and expanding on a word or concept used in a previous sentence.
- Parallelism and lists: look for similar items that might be grouped together.
- Closure/transitioning: the last sentence must give a sense of arriving at a conclusion, but also remaining open for the next paragraph (neither of the samples are final paragraphs).
- What else? Add a point.

1. The following sentences are part of an introductory paragraph. Please put them in order. (Keep the letters with their sentences so that we can compare in class.)

A. What we're dealing with is a genre that regards the spheres of ethics and aesthetics as at times incompatible, at times mutually exclusive.

B. The detective novel takes the most fundamental of transgressions, removes it from the sphere of morality, and treats it instead as the basis for a sport, a contest, a game, or a theatrical event.

C. Perfect Murders must be judged by the degree of their difficulty and by the artfulness of their contrivance, and that puts the matter in the appropriate aesthetic light.

D. In detective novels, murder becomes a branch of the fine arts, and individual cases are to be judged by criteria that wouldn't be inappropriate in a discussion of painterly technique or poetic craft.

2. The following sentences are part of the next paragraph in the same essay. Please place them in order (again, keep the letters with their sentences).

A. What Chesterton neglected to add was what Oscar Wilde had already proclaimed: The critic is himself a type of artist.

B. "The criminal is the creative artist' the detective only the critic," says Valentin, who is identified as "the head of the Paris police and the most famous investigator in the world" in Chesterton's first Father Brown tale, "The Blue Cross (1911).

C. In his guise as Great Detective, he is half poet, half scientist, an artist by temperament, a critic by trade.

D. He is both the culprit's nemesis, foiling him in the end, and the culprit's double, matching him stroke for stroke in cunning.

E. He's a connoisseur of crime, as other of his class and station may have become connoisseurs of Venetian art.

F. What the murderer creates, the sleuth interprets, much as a literary critic, analyzing a poem, will plumb it for meanings beyond those that the author intended.

G. Within this aesthetic sideshow, values must be assigned with a real or affected disregard for moral principles and premises; an aesthetically pleasing act may well be a purely immoral one. H. Chesterton, with his love of paradox, was quick to grasp the point.

from Chapter 4, "Murder Considered as a Fine Art"

[*The Perfect Murder*, by David Lehman, p. 42-43]

Perfect Murders must be judged by the degree of their difficulty and by the artfulness of their contrivance, and that puts the matter in the appropriate aesthetic light. What we're dealing with is a genre that regards the spheres of ethics and aesthetics as at times incompatible, at times mutually exclusive. The detective novel takes the most fundamental of transgressions, removes it from the sphere of morality, and treats it instead as the basis for a sport, a contest, a game, or a theatrical event. … In detective novels, murder becomes a branch of the fine arts, and individual cases are to be judged by criteria that wouldn't be inappropriate in a discussion of painterly technique or poetic craft.

Within this aesthetic sideshow, values must be assigned with a real or affected disregard for moral principles and premises; an aesthetically pleasing act may well be a purely immoral one. Chesterton, with his love of paradox, was quick to grasp the point. "The criminal is the creative artist' the detective only the critic," says Valentin, who is identified as "the head of the Paris police and the most famous investigator in the world" in Chesterton's first Father Brown tale, "The Blue Cross (1911). Chesterton cherished the *frisson* such a statement would produce in his ideal reader, but this shock effect doesn't diminish or deny the significance of the analogy. What the murderer creates, the sleuth interprets, much as a literary critic, analyzing a poem, will plumb it for meanings beyond those that the author intended. What Chesterton neglected to add was what Oscar Wilde had already proclaimed: The critic is himself a type of artist. In his guise as Great Detective, he is half poet, half scientist, an artist by temperament, a critic by trade. He's a connoisseur of crime, as other of his class and station may have become connoisseurs of Venetian art. He is both the culprit's nemesis, foiling him in the end, and the culprit's double, matching him stroke for stroke in cunning. It's natural, therefore, that contradictory impulses should be fused together in his person. He practices ratiocination, but that is sometimes just a fancy word for playing a hunch. A crime, if it is exceptional enough, will concentrate his mind wonderfully and impel him to expend vast quantities of energy, but he is naturally an indolent fellow. It's safe to presume that he's on the side of the angels, but like any responsible critic he must own up to his dependence on a prior creation—in his case, the work of art that is the original crime.

The detective in the classic tradition is, in other words, as much "a murder addict" as Agatha Christie's X. He is hooked on homicide, it determines his whole reason for being; he is never more alertly alive than when a fresh corpse beckons. To such a man, murder may be a moral violation, yes, but first it's an intellectual problem, something to solve rather than someone to punish. However much he affirms a code of justice, he remains an aesthete at heart, a dandy by the very nature of his calling, with a dandy's appreciation of the grotesque and the perverted. Not for nothing is Philip Trent, in E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* (1912), identified as "a painter and the son of a painter," an arty chap who compulsively quotes poetry—it's perfectly in keeping with his appetite for perfect murders. Trent is the model of all the dilettante crime solvers that would soon populate the literature: patrician fops like Wimsey and Ellery Queen, imported elves like Hercule Poirot, oversize curmudgeonly wizards like Gideon Fell and Nero Wolfe. Nor should it surprise us that Trent … is content to figure his culprit without bringing him to justice. Once the problem has been solved, the detective's duty is done with, and besides, he may have some lingering admiration for the fellow whose dark stratagems he has brought to light. Admiration" Yes, for didn't the man create a memorable diversion and provide a source of mental refreshment?

Essay 4

Draft due Friday, Mar. 9 by 12:00 pm in Dropbox, and Tue., Mar. 13 in class, three hard copies
Revised Complete Essay due Friday, Mar 16 by 12:00 in Dropbox and as hardcopy in mailbox (with marked-up drafts and evaluations)

Length: 3 pages (about 1000 words)

Option 1
Write an essay using one of the prompts from **Essay 3** that you liked but didn't use last time.

Option 2
You are French flâneur and sometime detective C. Auguste Dupin. From your Paris apartment on the third floor of No. 33, Rue Dunôt, Fabourg St. Germain, write a letter to your acquaintance, M. G----, prefect of the Paris Police, explaining why you have been able to solve his cases time and time again, while he and his force remain baffled. Include your own definition of evidence, and a thesis that sums up the reasons for your success in one or two sentences. Include quotations and examples from your most recent cases to support your case. Consider the tone that Dupin would likely adopt with M. G---- and try to incorporate some of Poe's unique diction (words like "recherché" and "outré") to make your voice more authentic.

Option 3
How does the **locked-room mystery** perfectly embody some of the central elements of classic whodunits? Use one or more of the locked-room mysteries we've read so far and make an argument about them that discusses their use of the **locked, impenetrable room**. In order to write this essay, you will need to define "locked-room mystery," define "classic whodunit," and make a case for what you think the central elements of classic mystery stories are. This option runs the risk of slipping into obvious statements; make sure you have a **real, arguable, tension-producing claim** that you're defending.

Option 4
In *The Usual Suspects*, Agent Kujan says to Verbal, "Convince me. Give me all the details." Consider this comment (and the whole interrogation) in connection with the following:

- Dershowitz's essay and the idea of life as a dramatic narrative, as well as the kind of dramatic narrative that detective stories propose. How does *The Usual Suspects* play off and subvert the viewer's mystery-story dramatic-narrative expectations?
- the relationship which a mystery story sets up between storyteller (interpret that term – who is the storyteller, in this film as well as more generally in detective stories?) and viewer/reader. How is this relationship mimicked and changed in the interrogation scene that fills the last portion of the film?

As one place to begin, you may want to map *The Usual Suspects* as a detective mystery: what are the central characters required for a mystery? If this film is a mystery, then which characters in the film fill the classic roles?

Option 5

Write an **analysis of Elizabeth Bishop's poem** "12 O'Clock News." This is a fairly open-ended question; in order to successfully complete this assignment, make sure you have a clear, arguable claim you want to make about the poem. Your claim should take into account the poem's structure, title, content, and language, as well as some (but probably not all) of the following questions:

- What is the **genre** of this piece of writing? Is it a mystery, a piece of journalism, a travel narrative, a personal essay, a piece of science fiction, an argumentative essay, or something else?
- What is the central point, theme, argument or meaning of the piece? How does it produce tension that makes the reader want to keep reading?
- What makes this poetry?
- Is the poem telling a story? What is the story? What are the different levels of the story (or stories), and how do they interact?

Option 6

Early on, Wimsey warns Murbles that investigating General Fentiman's death may stir up "a deuce of a stink" (p. 21).

"Unpleasantness" is what this novel says it is about. What is the beginning source of the unpleasantness, and what are the resulting "unpleasantness*es*"? Take this term to refer to all the unseemly, compromising, distasteful, and inelegant subjects and issues that emerge as Lord Peter and his associates start to dig up as they work on the case. Review and classify these unpleasantnesses, and use them to form a picture of the society portrayed in the novel. What is Lord Peter's relationship to "unpleasantness"? Does his work help to remedy and relieve unpleasantness, or does he help to repress them further? Does his work leave the society more or less healthy than when he started?

A good way of starting is to trace the occurrence of the word "unpleasantness" in the novel (when is it used? what does it refer to?), but don't stop there: some extremely unpleasant facts and developments don't need that label to be recognized as sources of embarrassment and denial. A more powerful starting point might be Lord Peter's remark at 38-39 (taken out of context): "I'm afraid we can't explain away the body," as well as the description of the exhumation in chapter XIII.

Other Guidelines:

- Either Essay 3 or Essay 4 needs to be a straight literary analysis paper—this means that if you wrote the revisionist analysis or the scene last time, you need to use one of the plain analytical options this time.
- In these essays, please include full introductions and conclusions; many of you did this already for Essay 3. Catch your reader's attention at the beginning, and provide closure and food for thought at the end.
- The prompts for Essay 4 are quite a bit more open-ended; if you need help developing a central claim or thesis, please come talk to me.
- You will need to include **direct quotes**, as well as other forms of textual evidence (paraphrase, summary, details, etc.) from the story or stories you are analyzing. These should be appropriately integrated and cited; see the *Style Manual*. You are welcome also to include quotes or ideas from any of the course materials we've read so far; if you do, make sure to integrate, attribute and cite their ideas appropriately (MLA; see Hacker).
- Again, use summary where needed, but make sure your essay is **at least eighty percent argument**, and whenever possible, integrate summary into your argument (give details as supporting evidence) rather than including it in large chunks.
- If you quote or paraphrase directly from stories or critical essays, make sure that each paragraph you write contains **over fifty percent your words**.
- Include a **Works Cited** for all sources used, including the story or stories. Make sure to format correctly; mistakes this time around will lower your grade. Your Works Cited does not need to be on a separate page.
- Refer to the **Style Sheet** for proper manuscript formatting; I will expect all essays to comply. If you write the letter from Dupin to M. G----, also observe proper formal letter etiquette (with address, signature, etc.).

The Sherlockian

an interdisciplinary journal of mystery story studies

You have been asked to read and report on an article accepted by *The Sherlockian* for publication in its January 2007 issue. The author may be revising this article before publication. He or she needs your editorial advice. Please read the article and complete the questions below. Do not be wantonly critical; be as specific as you can in suggesting desirable changes. Your report should point out the strengths as well as the weaknesses you see in the piece.

Author's name:
Title of article:
Reader's name:

1. Please summarize the writer's controlling purpose and central idea as you understand it. Do this in three or four sentences: be as comprehensive as possible.

2. Comment on the introduction: is it clear and interesting, and does it give adequate notice of what will follow?

3. Does the author cite enough detail from the text he or she writes about to enable a reader — even one who had not read that text — to understand what is being said? Where should s/he cite more from the text or go into greater detail about the text?

4. What features of the writing strike you as most effective and interesting?

5. Where do you feel confused, or uncertain of the writer's direction, or in need of more information and understanding?

6. Present one objection that might be made to the argument of the author's article. Go into detail, if necessary, in developing that objection.

7. Make any additional comments that you think will help the author in revising this article.

[adapted from handout by Stuart Davis]

Essay 5:
Revision Extraordinaire
Revision/Expansion of Essay 3 or 4

Length: 5 pages, or about 1600 words

You have two choices for this essay: You may revise and expand either Essay 3 or 4. By "revise or expand" I do not mean "fix spelling errors and tack on two pages." There should be a **significant addition to the idea/argument of your paper, which causes more than surface editing**. You may consider a story to add to your argument, incorporate one of the critical readings from the course, or do outside research. One way or another, you should incorporate at least **one new source** (story, critical piece, or contextual research information) that you did not use in the previous essay. If you have not spoken to me about ways to expand one of your essays and you don't find enough direction in the comments you received from me on Essay 3 and 4, get in touch with me and we can arrange a conference or confer over e-mail. Your grade on Essay 5 will not automatically go up. It will depend both on the quality of the essay itself and on the quality of the revision and expansion.

Response Papers
due Tue. Mar. 27th, Tue. Apr. 10th, Thu. April 12th, Thu. Apr. 19th

There are four response papers assigned over the rest of the semester. These are short papers, graded according to the check-mark system, which are assigned for your benefit specifically. These papers are your opportunity to explore ideas that interest you, to experiment, to brainstorm. Each paper is given with one prompt in the Unit 4 calendar, but these prompts **need not be followed**; they are given only if you need a place to start. If you have an idea of your own you'd like to pursue, go for it.

The papers need not have clear central arguments, though they must in some way analyze the text you are discussing, and should explore ideas that go beyond summary. One good way to do this is to choose either a recurring item (color, light, a word or concept that is repeated through the story) and trace its appearance in the novel or story, or to choose a particular passage and observe it in great detail. You may write them as freewrites if you want, which means they need not have a clear structure and may make unusual leaps. You should do good thinking here, but polish is not the purpose of these papers. The ideas may be fragmented or far-fetched; don't be afraid to try directions or arguments that might not work. Think of these papers as two pages in which to let your thoughts meander in whatever direction they'd like, as long as they stay connected to the text.

Writing About The Big Sleep

Response Paper 2
(due Tue. Apr. 10)
Write two pages on Raymond Chandler's prose style — on what is distinctive in the language Philip Marlowe uses to present himself to us and to other characters in *The Big Sleep*. Quote frequently, and discuss what you quote. You may wish to use a line or two of William Marling's remark on Chandler's language, below: what "world view" is implicit in the way Marlowe talks?

OR

Write two pages of narrative parodying Chandler's style. To do this, take a scene or situation from one short detective story we've read: tell it as Philip Marlowe would tell it if he were involved and speaking Chandlerese. (Don't try to tell the whole story. Do try to make it funny.)

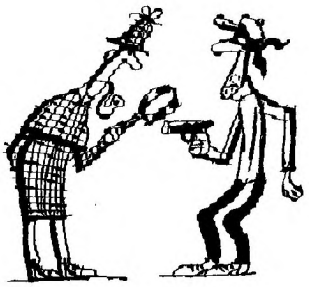
Response Paper 3
(due Thu. Apr. 12)
Write a 1-2 page analysis of the translation of Chandler's novel into film. You will need to list concrete differences between the two, but make sure to spend a significant portion of the paper writing not just about "what" but about "why." Do not merely list the ways in which the film deviates from the story – rather, tell me *why* you think the film deviates, and what impact the changes have on the meaning of the story.

An Option for the Response Paper 4 on Borges, "Death and the Compass"
due Thursday, April 19

Find one paragraph, passage, or even sentence in "Death and the Compass" that connects in some way to a particular passage from another reading for the course. This is literally any of the reading from the entire course; consider *Thursday* and Brooks' essay on plot, and any of the other stories or essays we've read so far. Go back to the very beginning of the semester; everything we've read can be related to this story.

Write one paragraph's worth of notes on the relationships between the passages you've chosen, in terms of language, theme, structure, definition of the mystery genre, or any other connection you see.

To class, bring *The Man Who Was Thursday*, your course pack, and any other pieces you find related.



Paper Topics for Essay 6

introductory paragraph and outline due Tue. Apr. 24
full draft due Thu. Apr. 26 (bring 3 copies for peer review)
final draft due Fri. May 4

Length: 5-7 pages (about 1650-2300 words)

Here are some starting points for Essay 6 (on anything we've read this semester, including Sayers, *Unpleasantness*, Chesterton's *Thursday*, Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, as well as Poe's "The Purloined Letter" and Borges' "Garden" or "Death"). These are starting points; it is your job to give "point" and "focus" to the topic you choose, and to develop the topic into a clear argument.

Option 1:
Develop your own argument on any text (or combination of two or possibly three texts; be careful not to spread yourself too thin, though) we've read this semester. I encourage you to try this option; several of the following prompts are also very open-ended and will require you to come up with your own argument to a large extent. You may also use any of the prompts for literary analysis essays from earlier papers.

Option 2: Women, 1
"D'you know, occasionally I think there's quite a lot to be said for women," says Lord P. (p. 45). Something in this book is said for them; quite a lot more is said *about* them, and not all of it pleasant. Women may seem to be alternately sidelined and maligned in the book, and that may not be altogether an accident. If we ask why, uninteresting and more interesting answers come to mind. The less interesting begin *and end* with the fact that the society of the book is a male-dominated one (what else is new?). The more interesting answers to the "Why?" question might trace the narrative logic by which a problem of inheritance initially "caused" by one woman is finally resolved not only by the identification of a murderer but by what looks like a prospective marriage. Those answers might pay considerable attention to Ann Dorland -- to what is said about her and to her complex role in the dénouement of the book. (Is she one of those "advanced women" that Captain Fentiman complains about (66)? How does she differ from other women in the book? Why is Lord Peter so successful with her in chapters xx and xxii?) To ask about women in this book is therefore to ask not only why their roles are so slight but also how their roles may be important in some transparently obvious ways. Do so.

Option 3: Women, 2
The *femme fatale* figure is most clearly developed in *The Big Sleep*, but you may use any other stories or books you find relevant. Use the following quotation, from a writer on the *femme fatale* in cineman, to frame and develop an argument about the role of *femmes fatales* in specific pieces we've read this semester; make sure you have an argument that goes beyond the definition of *femme fatale* generally.

> In what does the deadliness of the femme fatale consist and why is she so insistently a figure of fascination in the texts of modernity? Her power is of a peculiar sort insofar as it is usually not subject to her conscious will. . . . She is an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power but its *carrier* (the connotations of disease are appropriate here) . . . . In a sense, she has power *despite herself*. . . . The femme fatale is an articulation of fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of the self, the "I," the ego. These anxieties appear quite explicitly in the process of her representation as castration anxiety. . . . The power accorded to the femme fatale is a function of fears linked to the notions of uncontrollable drives, the fading of subjectivity, and the loss of conscious agency — all themes of the emergent theories of psychoanalysis. But the femme fatale is situated as evil and is frequently punished or killed. Her textual eradication involves a desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject.
>
> — Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis.* Routledge: New York, 1991. 2

Option 4: The Big Sleep

Write an essay with a precisely defined thesis on some aspect of *The Big Sleep* that interests you. Use one of the excerpts given or referenced below to give focus and direction to your essay. (You can "apply" it, disagree with part or all of it, adopt and extend a position it takes or an observation it makes. But make sure *you* are in control of your essay. Your job isn't to parrot the ideas of the source; instead, use the source to sharpen your original view of *Big Sleep*.)

As usual, use MLA style to give references for quotations in your text and for the use you make of secondary sources. Include a "Works Cited" page. Follow the models in Hacker's *Pocket Style Manual,* pp. 128ff.

1. A remark from a commentator on this book.

> Despite its striking triumphs, *The Big Sleep* is flawed in several important ways. It is two stories, patched together. There is no logical necessity in Marlowe's continuing, against the General's directions, to discover the fate of Rusty Regan in the second half of the novel. . . . [Marling cites some other improbabilities here, including the identity and method of the murder solved in the last pages of the book.]
>
> Chandler got away with the plot because he was a superb scenarist. Individual scenes are so well written, so engaging, that the reader is overwhelmed by what Edgar Allan Poe said was of primary importance: "the construction of the effect." Chandler bears him out. He articulates a world bewilderingly filled with detail and incident, the nature of which, as revealed by simile, hyperbole, and irony, seems to be godless, a world of matter and laws of physics. But the tropes [i.e. figures of speech] and the repartee work from an assumption that somewhere, somebody has things figured out. It is, of course, the author or his proxy, the detective. A worldview is implicit in the metaphors, which constantly make connections between people, events, items, and feelings, hinting at some coherence. They prepare the reader to accept the unity of understanding offered by the detective code, which is the oversoul of the various tropes.
>
> — William Marling, *Raymond Chandler.* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986, p. 78.

2. One or more remarks from Chandler's "The Simple Art of Murder" in our Course Supplement,[2] especially the last two pages, where Chandler comments on the nobility of the detective and the "quality of redemption" in the detective story, on the detective's sexuality and attitudes towards women, on his language as detective and narrator, or on the "not . . . very fragrant world" in which we live.

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[2] from Howard Haycroft, ed. *The Art of the Mystery Story* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1968), 147-158.

3. A remark from a contemporary writer on crime fiction (whom you've met already this semester).

> Crime in the hard-boiled novel is not an extraordinary circumstance but something like a banal evil. Behind every Agatha Christie puzzle lies a puzzlemaker's universe, where every piece of the puzzle has its place. Behind Raymond Chandler's novels — whose plots are so difficult to follow — there is chaos. You begin not with a case of order, Edenic or otherwise, that's about to be violated. Rather you begin with systems running amok, patterns of confusion. You begin with organized criminality, a society in which disrespect for the law is general. The novel that grows out of such circumstances will necessarily critique rather than affirm the prevailing social order. . . .
>
> The contract between the reader and writer of a Chandler novel calls for a shared view of our social world as universally corrupt. To fulfill our expectations, the plot must leave no sector of society untouched, untainted by a criminal environment whose circumference keeps widening and whose center lies at the heart of the city's intricate maze. No murder occurs in isolation. Each sets off a chain reaction of subsequent crimes and cover-ups, conspiracies, and corpses. Everyone is implicated; no one is safe. Which is also why Marlowe tends to stumble on more than one crime that's seemingly irrelevant to the case at hand. There may be false scents — and how *The Big Sleep* reeks of them — but they double as true indicators of how much we all have to hide, how incriminating our associations would appear if someone took a magnifying glass to our lives. . . .
>
> In its simplest and least interesting form, Chandler's brand of social criticism is an undisguised expression of class resentment.
>
> — David Lehman, *The Perfect Murder: A Study in Detection.* Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2000. 142, 144, 146.

Option 5: Plotting

Consider Peter Brooks' chapter from "Reading for the Plot" and apply its analysis to one or both of Borges' stories, and/or, if you like, Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*. What are Brooks' main points? Do not summarize them, but rather tell us their relevance to these particular stories. What is the relationship between time and space in the stories? How many different kinds of plots do the stories contain, and how are those plots constructed? What is the significance of each plot (in terms of narrative structure, choices about genre, suspense, etc.) to the story as a whole?

Option 6: Poetry

Discuss the role of chaos, order, analysis and poetry in Poe's "The Purloined Letter" and Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*. Pay particular attention to G— and Dupin's differing classifications of who is a poet and what that means, as well as Syme and Gregory's discussion in the first several chapters of *Thursday* about the role of chaos and order in poetry. What are the differences in definition of the terms, between characters within stories, as well as between stories, and what larger conclusions can you draw about the stories based on those differing definitions?

Option 7: Murder Considered as a Fine Art

David Lehman's passage on murder as fine art in order to frame an argument about crime in any of the pieces we've written (citation: David Lehman, *The Perfect Murder: A Study in Detection.* Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2000. 42-43.). One option here is to compare the kind of fine art that murder is in a golden age mystery like Sayers' *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* to a hard-boiled murder mystery like *The Big Sleep*. Borges would also be a fascinating subject.

Option 8: Write Your Own Mystery
See "How to Write a Mystery Story" handout. If you are interested in this option, run your idea by me in an e-mail or a conference before turning in the draft. This is not an "easy out" – you will likely end up spending more time on it than you would on an essay. Because stories are very difficult to develop in seven pages, you may go over the page limit if you choose this option.

Option 9
Write about any of the stories or films not listed here – *Donnie Darko* and *The Usual Suspects* are excellent options.
